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C O N F I D E N T I A L MANILA 000986

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STATE FOR EAP/MTS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/07/2019

TAGS: [MOPS](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [RP](#)

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR MEETS WITH NEW CHIEF OF THE ARMED FORCES

REF: MANILA 834: NEW ARMED FORCES CHIEF NAMED

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

**¶11. (C) SUMMARY:** Ambassador met with newly appointed Philippine Chief of the Armed Forces Lieutenant General Victor Ibrado May 7, affirming U.S. support for our strong bilateral military relationship and congratulating him on his selection as commander of the Armed Forces. Although Ibrado had been named to the top position on April 15, his predecessor, General Alexander Yano, was expected to remain AFP Chief of Staff until his scheduled retirement on June 13.

In a surprise announcement April 27, Secretary of National Defense Gilberto Teodoro said that Yano would retire earlier than expected on May 1 and be appointed Philippine ambassador to Brunei. During her meeting with Ibrado, Ambassador emphasized U.S. commitment to ongoing counterterrorism efforts against the Abu Sayyaf Group and Jemaah Islamiyah in the southern Philippines and to strengthening the Philippine disaster relief capability. She also told Ibrado that the USG stood ready to provide assistance to advance the peace process with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. Ibrado thanked the Ambassador for USG contributions across a wide range of activities, including humanitarian assistance, counterterrorism, and military readiness training and expressed his optimism that the U.S.-Philippine military partnership will continue to grow in the future. END SUMMARY.

**¶12. (C)** Ambassador called on new Chief of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) Lieutenant General Victor Ibrado and members of his staff May 7. Although Ibrado had been named to the top position on April 15 (reftel), his predecessor, General Alexander Yano, was expected to remain AFP Chief of Staff until his scheduled retirement on June 13. However, on April 27, Secretary of National Defense Gilberto Teodoro said Yano had been appointed as Philippine ambassador to Brunei and would retire May 1, allowing Ibrado to assume the post approximately six weeks earlier than had been anticipated. Ibrado previously served as Commander of the Philippine Army and is a highly-respected veteran soldier. His selection as AFP Chief of Staff lends credibility to previous statements by senior government officials that promotion to the upper echelons of the Philippine military will continue to be based on professional criteria rather than politics. In a recent discussion with the Ambassador, Teodoro lauded Ibrado and said he would keep the military on track toward greater professionalization.

CHANGING PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS

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**¶13. (C)** The meeting with Ibrado came at the conclusion of

this year's annual Balikatan joint military exercise and the first-ever ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) field exercise, a disaster relief demonstration held north of Manila that included 26 of the 27 ARF nations -- only the Democratic People's Republic of Korea did not participate -- and over 300 participants and observers. The Ambassador lauded the Philippine government's sustained efforts to make both events a success. In the case of Balikatan, the Ambassador commented that effective outreach by the AFP and U.S.

personnel had buried early leftist propaganda under a wave of positive reactions from public figures and the media, but suggested that a more forward leaning public affairs posture for future exercises might counter the ability of leftist activists to get traction in their criticism of the U.S. military. Ibrado agreed and commented that it was heartening to see the rhetoric in the areas of the humanitarian activities shift from "we don't want you here" to "please don't go."

#### KEEPING UP PRESSURE ON EXTREMISTS

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14. (C) During their meeting, the Ambassador reiterated the USG's strong support for the Philippine government's fight against terrorist elements in Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago in the southern Philippines. General Ibrado thanked the Ambassador for training and assistance provided by the Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines and said that U.S. troops' daily involvement with their Philippine counterparts paid great dividends in terms of enhancing the AFP's professionalism and tactical capabilities. The Ambassador emphasized that pressure must be maintained on the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) terrorist groups and that U.S. personnel would continue their efforts to identify training and equipment that would prove most beneficial to the Philippine forces in their counterterrorism operations. Ibrado said that ASG and JI elements were increasingly located in areas of difficult terrain making pursuit a challenge, but that he had instructed his division commanders to intensify operations against them so they would not be able to find sanctuary anywhere, a strategy that would hopefully lead to their capture or death.

#### REDUCING TERRORISTS' OPERATING SPACE

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15. (C) General Ibrado highlighted humanitarian assistance and disaster relief as two of the areas in which U.S. military assistance had played an extremely valuable role. Ibrado cited the 2008 visit of the USNS Mercy to Samar as a complementary capstone to his efforts to use civil-military projects in the area to reduce the influence of the terrorist New People's Army when he was commander of the Philippine Central Command in Cebu in 2007. He also noted that USG assistance rendered in the aftermath of Typhoon Frank in June 2008 had been invaluable. Ibrado stressed the need for a broader emphasis on "soft power" to reduce the operating space for terrorists and bolster support for the government in economically depressed areas of the country. The Ambassador concurred and said that the United States would continue to make civil-military operations a key component of our assistance and that the USG stood ready to assist the Philippines when future calamities occurred.

16. (C) On broader military-military engagement, General Ibrado said the AFP was studying the resource requirements of placing a liaison officer with the U.S. Fifth Fleet to work on the Somali piracy issue. The Ambassador commended Ibrado on the Philippine's robust presence in United Nations peacekeeping deployments and said that the Mission would be working closely with the AFP this year on improving its peacekeeping capabilities through the Global Peace Operations Initiative, which the Philippines joined in 2008. The Ambassador also noted that the USG had requested funds for the Coast Watch South initiative to augment maritime security in the southern Philippines. She also told Ibrado that the USG stood ready to provide whatever assistance it could to

advance the peace process with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. General Ibrado thanked the Ambassador for U.S. assistance in these key areas.

COMMENT

17. (C) The reasons for General Yano's premature retirement and General Ibrado's assumption of the top post earlier than anticipated are unclear. Some senior AFP officers have speculated that Yano was ready to step down, rather than be perceived as a lame duck for another month. However, Yano told the Ambassador he was deeply surprised -- and dismayed -- when his departure was advanced twice without his knowledge. Other contacts have conjectured that President Arroyo, whose term expires in May 2010, intends to replace Ibrado with a more loyal retainer before Ibrado's one-year tour as AFP Chief of Staff is finished. Nevertheless, the Mission views General Ibrado as well qualified for his new position. He is keen to expand the Philippine Armed Forces' contact with other militaries, particularly the U.S., through educational exchanges and other programs. With senior command experience in regions of intense leftist activity, Ibrado brings a sophisticated understanding of the effectiveness of "soft power" to the top spot in the Philippine military. At the same time, he will not shrink from ordering his subordinates to use all force necessary to bring terrorists to justice, a quality which should extend the Philippine government's record of success against extremists.

KENNEY